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ABSTRACT

The book "Bilingual Education in Massachusetts: The Emperor Has No Clothes" is summarized. The summary outlines the demographic situation of the limited-English-proficient (LEP) population and the status of bilingual education in the state, within the context of existing legislation. Issues in the debate over availability and type of bilingual education to be provided are examined, and current instructional approaches and techniques are noted. Differences in program provision that are linked to language group are discussed, and research concerning the effectiveness of bilingual education is reviewed briefly. Three additional issues discussed include the identification and transitioning of eligible students, costs of transitional programs, and public opinion on bilingual education. Eight recommendations are made for regulatory and legislative reform to improve educational programs for LEP students: freeing school districts from legal obligation to provide native language instruction; increasing LEP population size needed to trigger a self-contained classroom; requiring parent consent for enrollment in self-contained classroom; requiring English language fluency for LEP program teachers; changing entry/exit criteria for self-contained classrooms; eliminating specific class-size ceilings; better research; and improved program structure. (MSE)

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Bilingual Education in Massachusetts: The Emperor Has No Clothes

by Christine H. Rossell and Keith Baker

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Book Summary

Bilingual Education in Massachusetts: The Emperor Has No Clothes

by Christine H. Rossell and Keith Baker

Massachusetts is one of only nine states in the country to require bilingual education in all school districts where there is a sufficient number of limited-English-proficient (LEP) students. Moreover, Massachusetts has set the lowest threshold for mandatory bilingual education in the country: 20 LEP students in a single language group in a district—an average of fewer than 2 students in each grade—triggers native tongue instruction in a separate classroom taught by a bilingual certified teacher. In total, almost 40,000 students in 51 Massachusetts districts were enrolled in bilingual education programs in 1993-94. Nevertheless, observations of actual classroom practice demonstrate that these students are not all receiving the same style of education. As a general rule, only Spanish-speaking students—who comprise more than half of the LEP population in the Commonwealth—are taught to read and write in their native language, while also receiving some native language instruction in other academic subjects, as existing law requires. Students from virtually all other language groups, though enrolled in "bilingual education," receive instruction almost exclusively in English, with at most a few hours per week of enrichment in their native languages and cultures. By way of example, many of these students are taught primarily in regular education classrooms and are pulled out for instruction in English as a Second Language (ESL). Even some Spanish-speaking LEP students in "bilingual education" are not taught to read or write in their native language.

The diversity of practice becomes even more apparent when one takes into account the differences between elementary and secondary grades. At the elementary level, there is at least a chance that a district might be able to pull together enough students in the same language group to fill a bilingual education class, with its own certified teacher who is fluent in both English and the applicable foreign language. At the secondary level, however, where most students move from one classroom and one subject to another throughout the school day, it is next to impossible to assemble a large enough teaching staff to ensure

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that each LEP student receives instruction in his or her native language. The extent of native language instruction is further influenced by the language skills of individual teachers (who are currently not required to be fluent in English) and the availability of foreign language texts and materials applicable to the curriculum. In sum, it is not unusual to find great differences in educational programs for LEP students from one language to another, from one district to another, from one grade to another, and even from one classroom to another.

One would expect the spotty implementation of the Massachusetts bilingual education law to be cause for complaint. In reality, however, it has been the flexible implementation (or non-implementation) of this rather prescriptive law that has kept the program from collapsing of its own weight. Twenty-five years after passage of the bilingual education law in Massachusetts, there is still no proof that the mandated approach to teaching works better than other approaches, such as intensive English instruction. Not only is there no proof from Massachusetts, but there is none from the many studies that have been conducted in other states. Indeed, if one can draw any conclusion at all from the research it is that teaching a LEP student to read and write in the native language is at least marginally detrimental to his or her overall education and acquisition of English. While test scores and high school completion rates among Hispanic students in Massachusetts (a significant portion of whom are or have been in TBE programs) have improved over the past 25 years, they have fallen relative to other groups since enactment of the Transitional Bilingual Education Act in 1971. At a minimum, the program has not fulfilled the expectations of its supporters.

Because of these findings we recommend that the existing mandate to provide bilingual programs be amended to require that districts simply provide "educational programs" targeted to LEP children. Of equal importance, the impractical threshold of 20 LEP students in a single language group in a district should be relaxed. Furthermore, the law should be amended to require teachers of LEP children to demonstrate fluency in English and to allow placement of students in separate LEP classrooms only with the express and prior consent of their parents.

Alternative Approaches to Educating LEP Students

Bilingual education, as it is commonly called, is a controversial issue throughout Massachusetts and the United States. At the heart of this controversy are three issues:

1) Should LEP children receive, because of their language barrier, special instruction not given to other children with learning problems?
2) Should LEP children be taught to read and write in their native language? and
3) Should time be taken out of the regular instructional day to teach LEP children about their particular culture?

Although the public may disagree about the answers to these questions, federal and state policymakers have, since 1968 in the United States and 1971 in Massachusetts, come squarely down on the affirmative side. Both the federal government and the state of Massachusetts have provided billions of dollars to fund programs that provide instruction in the native language and in the native culture of LEP children.

The national literature acknowledges four basic instructional alternatives for teaching LEP children. The first of the models is submersion, often called "sink-or-swim." In this model, the LEP child is placed in a regular English-language classroom with monolingual children and given no more special help than any child with educational problems.

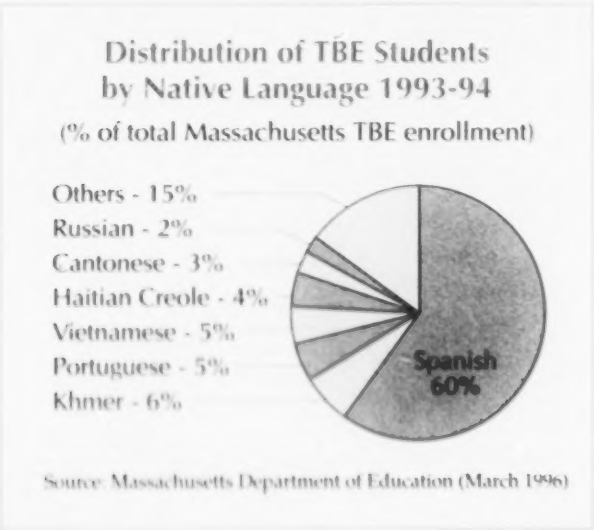
A second technique is English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction for one or two periods a day, or in some districts two or three periods a week, and participation in the regular English-language classroom for the rest of the time. ESL is a pullout program usually based on a special curriculum for teaching English to LEP children, but the instructors do not have to speak the child's native language.

A third instructional technique is structured immersion—instruction is in the second language being learned (i.e., English) in a self-contained classroom, but the teacher usually knows how to speak the students' native language. Instruction is geared to the children's language proficiency at each stage so that it is comprehensible; students thus learn the second language and subject matter content simultaneously. The native language is used only in the rare instances when a child cannot complete a task without it. In the United States,

the term "structured immersion" is almost never used by practitioners. Teachers and administrators call such programs "bilingual education," "bilingual immersion," or, particularly at the secondary level, "sheltered" classes—for example, "Sheltered English I," "Sheltered English II," and so forth.

The fourth instructional technique is transitional bilingual education (TBE). In TBE, the student is taught to read and write in the native language, with subject matter also taught in the native language. The second language (i.e., English) is initially taught for only a small portion of the day. As the child progresses in English, the amount of instructional time in the native language is reduced and English increased until the student is proficient enough in English to join the regular instructional program. This transition is typically made over a three-year period. The rationale underlying TBE differs depending on the age of the child. For very young children, TBE proponents claim that learning to read in the native language first is a necessary condition for optimal reading ability in the second language. For all children, regardless of age, TBE proponents argue that learning a second language takes time and children should not lose ground in other subject areas, particularly math, during that period. The educational theory used to explain how TBE works is known as the facilitation theory. First presented by James Cummins in 1978, this theory has two parts: the first states that in order to make optimal cognitive progress in a second language, a LEP child must first attain a "threshold" level of competence in the native language. The second part attributes to native language skills a facilitating effect on learning the grammar and usage of a second language. Of the four methods, only TBE is characterized by instruction to develop literacy in the native (i.e., non-English) language.

A variation on transitional bilingual education is bilingual maintenance. These programs resemble TBE in their early years, but they differ in that their goal is to produce fully bilingual children, and thus students do not leave when they master English.



Bilingual Education in Massachusetts

The Transitional Bilingual Education Act, Chapter 71A of the Massachusetts General Laws, requires that a full-time transitional bilingual education program be implemented in every school district where there are 20 LEP students of a single minority language group. There are 51 such districts (known as the TBE districts) in the state. The language groups include Spanish, "Chinese" (Cantonese, Mandarin, and other dialects), Khmer, Portuguese, Cape Verdean (Kriolu and other dialects), Greek, Italian, Arabic, Armenian, Haitian Creole (several dialects), Laotian, Russian (which includes non-Russian languages of other former Soviet republics), Vietnamese, Hmong, Hebrew, Japanese, Korean, Polish, and Gujarati.

Even if there were enough teachers certified in each of these languages to provide native language instruction, Massachusetts school districts simply could not afford to operate self-contained classrooms with as few as 2 or 3 students (assuming the 20 students in the district are evenly distributed across 13 grades, and two grades are combined in each classroom), as the law stipulates. While programs can be and are split across schools so that grades K and 1 are offered in one school, grades 2 and 3 in another, and so forth, true TBE programs with native language instruction can realistically only be offered in a K-5 school if there are at least 108 students of a single language group (at a pupil/teacher ratio of 18 to 1 as required by the regulations). The numbers required grow substantially at the secondary level when departmentalization occurs (different subjects taught by different teachers). Since teachers then have to be certified in both a subject matter and in a foreign language to teach in a bilingual program, few school districts are able to staff bilingual programs in all subjects at these grade levels.

Different Programs for Different Language Groups

At the March 30, 1995 hearings on Governor William F. Weld's reform bill, "An Act Relative to Bilingual Education" (HB 1447), Hispanic students testified in Spanish (subsequently translated by others into English) in favor of transitional bilingual education and against the Governor's bill, which offered school districts the right to state funding for programs that did not include native language instruction. Asian students also testified, but in English, in favor of TBE and against the bill. No one, including the students themselves, acknowledged or even seemed to realize that the programs in which these distinct groups were enrolled bore no resemblance to each other, a fact suggested by the language in which each group testified.

Differences in education programs as a function of the language group are a well-kept secret in Massachusetts and the rest of the United States. According to a study by Young et al. (1984), nationwide at least 40 percent of all LEP children were in programs called TBE, while only 26 percent were in English instruction classrooms in 1982. The other 34 percent were divided among bilingual maintenance, Spanish instruction, and ESL classes. Okada et al. (1983) found *no* projects that reported mastery of English only as a literacy goal for LEP students. The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) and US English (1994) reported 60 percent of the state- and locally funded programs for LEP students were labeled "bilingual education" in 1991-92. Thus, education programs that include native language instruction appear to be the dominant approach to teaching LEP children in the United States.

We use the word "appear" in a deliberate sense, however, since it is clear from visiting classrooms and reading evaluation reports that virtually the only LEP school children receiving native language instruction in the United States according to TBE theory—learning to read and write in the native language and learning subject matter in the native language—are Spanish-speaking elementary students, and even this group does not always receive native language instruction. The instructional environment for Spanish speakers enrolled in programs called TBE can run the gamut from self-contained classrooms with extensive native language instruction to regular classroom enrollment with periodic ESL pullout instruction. Whether any particular Spanish-speaking student receives native language instruction depends on the size of the Spanish-speaking population in the school district and the availability of Spanish-speaking teachers. Based on our observations, no other language minority students, even those enrolled in programs called TBE, actually receive much, if any, native language instruction—regardless of the size of the language group and regardless of the availability of teachers fluent in the language.

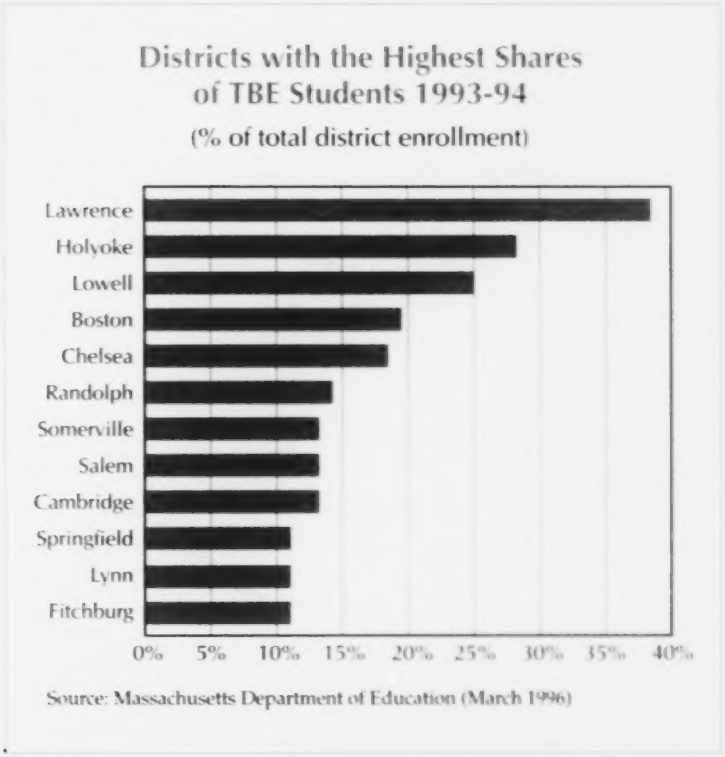
Education programs for non-Spanish-speaking LEP students are closer to what we would call structured immersion, even though for political, legal, or funding reasons they may be called TBE.

The Effectiveness of Bilingual Education

"Bilingual education" is thus different things to different people—in practice, there is no single approach called "bilingual education" or even a single approach called "transitional bilingual education." This phenomenon, of course, only complicates the issue of evaluating and analyzing the effects of these programs—as does the difference between elementary and secondary school programs.

Unfortunately, there has been no scientific research conducted in Massachusetts evaluating the TBE programs that have been in place over the last 25 years. Christine Rossell wrote to the 51 TBE districts (those districts with more than 20 LEP students of a single language group) in 1993, asking for recent program evaluations that related program characteristics to educational outcomes. The typical response was that the only evaluations conducted were data requests from the state department of education. Others simply failed to respond. Although there are a few Massachusetts program evaluations in the national Educational Research Information Clearinghouse (ERIC) database for earlier years, none is a scientific evaluation relating program characteristics to educational outcomes. In its 1994 report, the Massachusetts Bilingual Education Commission concludes,

> ...Despite TBE being in place in Massachusetts for 23 years, we don't know whether TBE is effective. In short, we do not know, on the basis of measured outcomes, whether TBE



programs in Massachusetts produce good results or poor results. There are no comprehensive data that evaluate the performance of TBE pupils compared with pupils from other groups.

There has been some scientific research conducted in other states and countries over this period. Rossell and Baker (1996) reviewed hundreds of studies conducted from the 1960s to the present. Of the 300 program evaluations we were able to locate, only 72 conformed to the standards for a scientific study. These 72 studies offer no consistent research support for transitional bilingual education as a superior instructional practice for improving the English language achievement of LEP children.

Selecting and Exiting Students in TBE

There are a number of problems with the procedures used to identify children eligible for TBE and to measure their progress. Home language surveys ask about what language is spoken at home, not the student's own abilities in English. Oral proficiency tests overidentify the number who are actually limited English proficient because the tests cannot tell the difference between a student who is simply limited in English and a student who has other educational problems. Roughly half of English monolingual students who take English oral proficiency tests "fail" them even though English is the only language they know. There are similar problems with standardized achievement tests since they are deliberately constructed so that half the students score below the 50th percentile, 35 percent score below the 35th percentile, and so forth. In sum, fallible instruments overidentify students as LEP; these same instruments prevent some students once in the program from ever getting out.

Thus, the statistics found in federal, state, and local documents on the number of LEP children have a wide margin of error in favor of overidentifying students as LEP. These statistics are not consistent from state to state, school district to school district, nor year to year within school districts and states.

The Cost of Transitional Bilingual Education

The calculation of the cost of TBE is a complex and lengthy process, which should involve classroom observation and extensive interviews to determine exactly what type of support each student is receiving. While valid cost data are limited, the evidence suggests that TBE is more expensive than the regular classroom and more expensive than other self-contained classroom programs, such as structured immersion, that teach in English, primarily because TBE requires two sets of materials and—by law—a smaller class size. But regular classroom instruction with ESL pullout, a common alternative in Massachusetts and elsewhere, can be more expensive than TBE (depending on its class size) because the former requires paying two teachers. In short, a self-contained classroom with one teacher, regardless of the language of instruction, may be less expensive than a program with one classroom teacher and a pullout program with another teacher; exactly how much less will often depend on the class size for each alternative.

Public Opinion on Bilingual Education

Opinion surveys show that the general public, and language minority parents in particular, support special help for LEP children, but many respondents are somewhat confused about what bilingual education means. This is not surprising since many educators and policymakers are similarly confused. Part of the confusion arises from the continued use of "bilingual education" to refer to programs in which students actually learn to read and write in English and learn content area in English, not in their native language.

When language minority parents have been asked to rank the three most important things they wanted their children to learn at school, they have displayed the same attitudes as all American parents—they stressed academics, English language, and then general education. Teaching the non-English language was mentioned by only a very small group, and almost no one mentioned instruction in ethnic heritage. Many language minority parents surveyed wanted their children to become literate in the native language, but they were not willing to give up any part of the regular school day in return.

Recommendations

In light of the many questions surrounding TBE in Massachusetts, we recommend the following legislative and regulatory reforms to improve educational programs for LEP students:

1) **Free School Districts from the Legal Obligation to Provide Native Language Instruction**. The first and most important policy recommendation is that school districts should be freed from the legal obligation to provide programs in native language instruction to LEP children.

2) **Increase the LEP Population Size Needed to Trigger a Self-Contained Classroom**. The law should be changed so that districts are not required to offer a self-contained classroom, regardless of the language of instruction, until the number of LEP students in any given *school* is at least 18 in any particular *grade*. These students do not need to be of the same language group since they can be taught in an all-English, structured immersion program. Nor should students be bused forcibly out of their neighborhood school or otherwise denied their school of choice in order to fill a LEP classroom. In any case, the district should not be obligated to keep a student in such a separate environment for more than one school year.

3) **Require Parental Consent for Enrollment in a Self-Contained Classroom**. Chapter 71A, as currently written, first places the child identified as LEP in transitional bilingual education and then allows parents to withdraw the child by written notice to the school authorities, thus placing the burden on parents to disagree with the authorities and to disrupt their child's education. We think the burden should be on the school district. Parents should have to give their written consent *before* their child is enrolled in *any* program with a self-contained classroom of LEP students, regardless of the language of instruction.

4) **Require English Language Fluency for Teachers in an Educational Program for LEP Children**. Teachers in educational programs for LEP children should not be granted certificates to teach LEP children unless they possess a bachelor's degree or better from an accredited university in the United States and meet the requirements set by the state board of education for certification in second language acquisition techniques. If the teacher is not a graduate of an academic institution in the United States, he or she should be required to demonstrate fluency in written and spoken English by means of an examination, both oral and written.

5) **Change the Criteria for Entering and Exiting a Self-Contained Classroom**. Tests should not be the only means of identifying students as LEP. Teachers are better judges of the ability of students to survive in a regular English language classroom and better able to determine whether students need extra help than are tests of any kind. First, a home language survey should identify students who are possibly limited English proficient by asking what language is most often spoken by the student. If it is a language other than English, this student should be referred to a Language Appraisal Team for each school or school district. This team should consist of administrators, regular classroom teachers, and teachers of limited-English-proficient children in self-contained classrooms (if they exist in the school). The Language Appraisal Team should also

make the decision as to whether a child is ready to be mainstreamed. The classroom teacher's evaluation should be the major factor, not test scores.

6) **Eliminate Specific Class-Size Ceilings**. The class size for self-contained classrooms of LEP students, regardless of the language of instruction, probably should be smaller than that for regular classrooms. Nevertheless, the current limit of 18 students per class (assuming one teacher, without an aide) is arbitrary and not grounded in research.

7) **Better Research**. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts should require local school districts to keep the kind of data that would allow social scientists to analyze variations in programs and the effects of these variations on English language acquisition and academic performance. More quality research needs to be done.

8) **The Ideal Program**. What scientific evidence there is on the effectiveness of alternative instructional programs for LEP children suggests that the best, and most cost-effective, program for LEP children is structured immersion. The language of instruction in a structured immersion program is English at a level the child can understand in a self-contained classroom of LEP students who are at approximately the same level of English language knowledge and the same age. The children in a structured immersion classroom do not have to be of the same language background, but the teacher should be trained in second language acquisition techniques. These programs should be fully integrated into regular schools so that students are exposed to English speakers on the playground, in the cafeterias, the halls, assemblies, and other areas before, during, and after school. LEP students should probably not remain in self-contained classrooms for more than a year, even if the language of instruction is English.

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Book Summary

Bilingual Education in Massachusetts: The Emperor Has No Clothes

by Christine H. Rossell and Keith Baker

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